APPROVED FOR RELEASE 1994
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
18SEPT95

TITLE: On The Trail Of The Alexandrovsk

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VOLUME: 10 ISSUE: Winter YEAR: 1966

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

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A secretive special shipment in the Cuban missile crisis.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE ALEXANDROVSK

Dwayne Anderson

Most often, in military intelligence, photographs are studied with the purpose of establishing military capabilities. Barracks, revetments, and launchers are counted to determine order-of-battle strength. Missiles, tanks, and submarines are measured to determine their characteristics. In one case, however, this process led to an unusual combination of photographs and the belated discovery of a Soviet operation that had peaked at the crucial juncture between the buildup and withdrawal of strategic missiles in Cuba.

Quick Round Trip

In January 1963, long after the most critical days of the Cuban crisis, a stack of photographs taken in early October of Soviet naval bases in the Kola Inlet arrived in Washington. One of these, showing a merchant ship at the Guba Okolnaya submarine missile support facility, touched off the analytic chase.

A civilian ship at this highly secure missile installation seemed incongruous enough to make a check on the Guba Okolnaya files worth while. Photos dating back several years were reviewed. No other merchant ships were seen. No component of the U.S. intelligence community had evidence that any cargo ships except naval auxiliaries ever put into the base. The presence of this ship, the Alexandrovsk, was now clearly unusual and called for further analytic inquiry.

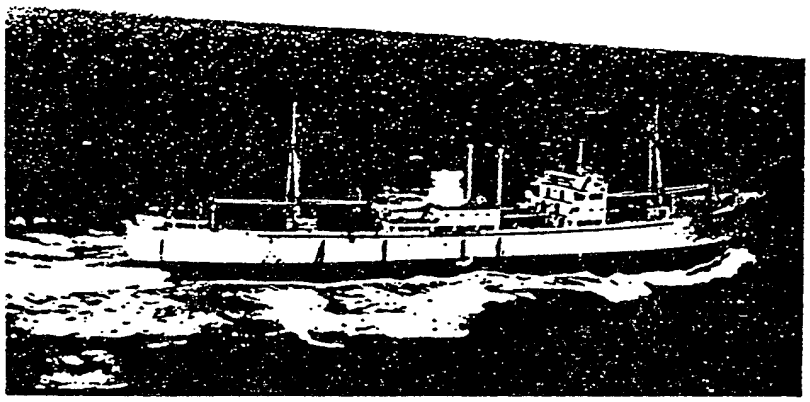
The date of the photographs, 3 October, suggested a line of attack. This was shortly after the first deliveries of IL 28's and MRBM's to Cuba. Could the Alexandrovsk have been Cuba bound and could she have carried a military cargo? If so, what would the particular cargo be and why was it being shipped from this Arctic base when all other such shipments, as far as we knew, had been made from Baltic and Black Sea ports?

Aerial photographs of all ships bound for Cuba were reexamined. No Alexandrovsk. The odds were against her having slipped through the U.S. air surveillance net; three out of every four ships going

to Cuba had been picked up. Interest in the Alexandrovsk waned, and her presence at the naval base seemed likely to become just another in the long list of unsolved intelligence anomalies.

One routine step remained, however—to review all the photographs of ships *returning* from Cuba to the Soviet Union. This was done, and eureka! there she was. A naval aircraft had picked her up on 10 November, position 26°30′ North, 53°17′ West, traveling light and fast, as shown below. Moreover, several interesting vehicles, including six missile nose cone vans, were on board (toward stern). Though other vessels would also leave Cuba with such nose cone vans, the Alexandrovsk had been one of the first to leave. Partially opened hatches suggested that additional personnel may have been on board, living in the 'tween-deck area. Research was again stepped up.

More facts were excavated. Checks of shipping data now showed that the Alexandrovsk was an old-timer in the Cuba trade but all her previous voyages had originated in the Baltic. In further restudy of air photography of Cuban ports it was found that she was at Mariel on 3 November. (She may have escaped surveillance on the way in by taking an unusual, southerly course, perhaps for that very purpose.) At Guba Okolnaya, it was known, nuclear warheads were probably stored and serviced; the presence of submarine missiles was certain. Also of interest at this base was a cement arch building near the waterfront that very closely resembled those built near missile sites in Cuba. Finally, newer photography of Guba Okolnaya showed the Alexandrovsk back there on 23 November with the vehicles still on deck.



CHRONOLOGY AUGUST-NOVEMBER 1962

Cuban Developments	Movements of the Alexandrovsk
Early August	
First activity at SAM sites and cruise missile sites noted	
Komar-class cruise missile boats arrive	
Late August	
First known delivery of MIG-21 fighters	
First activity at IRBM/MRBM sites	
Late September	
First known delivery of MRBM missile to launch site	Alexandrovsk arrives in Kola inlet
First known delivery of IL-28 jet light bombers	
Early October	
First identified flight of MIG-21 fighters	Alexandrovsk at Guba Okolnaya submarine missile facility, 5 October
Late October	
Quarantine proclamation, 23 October	Alexandrovsk probably arrived in Cuba just before quarantine
Soviet ground force encampments occupied	
Early November	
Soviets begin dismantling MRBM/IRBM sites	Alexandrovsk at Mariel on 3 November
MRBM/IRBM missiles taken out of Cuba	Alexandrovsk photographed at sea with nose cone vans on deck, 10 November
23 November	Alexandrovsk back at Guba Okolnaya base

Deadly Burden

The schedule of the Alexandrovsk now established and all available intelligence on the ship wrung out, it remained to determine the nature of her cargo. In early 1963, in the midst of rumors of missiles still in Cuba, underwater launchers, and strategic weapons stored in caves, any information on just what the Soviets had sent in or taken out was still of high interest. Moreover, the exact characteristics of the military buildup were important in evaluating Soviet intentions then and later.

Collecting information on this particular shipment had been difficult; analyzing it was much more so. Lists of plausible and possible cargoes were prepared, measured against likely Soviet requirements, and then examined in context of what the Guba Okolnaya base could supply. Hypothesis after hypothesis was shot down. Were the Soviets sending submarine ballistic missiles to Cuba? Unlikely. How about nuclear bombs for the IL-28 bombers? Also unlikely. At one point no hypotheses were left. But a few, phoenix-like, rose from the analytic ash pile.

One of the most plausible possibilities, and certainly the most significant, was that MRBM nuclear warheads had been carried by the Alexandrovsk. Evidence bearing on this hypothesis and on related questions was again sifted. Was Guba Okolnaya a likely transshipment point for MRBM equipment? Were naval and Strategic Rocket Force nuclear warheads interchangeable? Finally, were some of the basic identifications used in the analysis correct? Were "missile nose cone vans" really missile nose cone vans? Were cement arch buildings actually meant for nuclear warhead storage? In both cases the answer was a qualified yes.

Clearly the Soviets had intended to send nuclear warheads to Cuba; their strategic missiles were useless without them. What was not certain was whether they actually arrived, and this question seemed worth trying to answer even months after the crucial October-November period. If they had not been delivered the Soviets would have had no capability at all for attacking the United States with Cuba-based missiles during the crisis, and this might have had some bearing on their abject withdrawal. If, on the other hand, the warheads were present, the Soviet surrender was even more complete.

Overhead photography of Cuban installations had shown warhead handling and storage facilities to have been constructed but could

neither establish nor rule out the presence of the warheads themselves. A few Soviet public statements had implied that they were present, and Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznetsov said that nuclear warheads were taken out of Cuba immediately after the decision was made to remove the missiles. This, if true, would fit in with the fact that the Alexandrovsk was one of the first ships to leave after the decision. But there was no really cogent reason for believing the Soviet statements.

Additional research did not resolve the Alexandrovsk question conclusively, but it did sharpen the picture of what was and what was not known. It was clear that the Alexandrovsk did make an unusual voyage to and from Cuba during a critical period. She called at the probable nuclear storage facility at Guba Okolnaya before her outbound voyage and again on her return, when she carried a deck cargo of nose cone vans. If the Soviets had wanted to avoid having an incoming shipment of nuclear warheads monitored for radioactivity in the Turkish or Danish Straits, the simplest way would have been to send them from the north. It could be concluded that the Alexandrovsk may have carried some.

Thus ended a three months' chase which involved intelligence from a wide variety of scattered sources and analytic assistance from several organizations in the intelligence community. The results were only presumptive; we will probably never learn with assurance what the ship carried. But the exercise provided at least a small increment in our understanding of the Cuban crisis.